

Gulf of Mexico Red Snapper

Frequently Asked Questions

September 2006



Why is the Gulf of Mexico red snapper fishery such a hot topic?

- Red snapper supports one of the most important commercial and recreational fisheries in the Gulf of Mexico (GOM).
- There are three fisheries involved in red snapper harvest and management: directed commercial red snapper, directed recreational red snapper, and commercial shrimp.
- The red snapper stock has been overfished and undergoing overfishing since the late 1980s.
- The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Council) revised the red snapper rebuilding plan in 2005 to restore the GOM red snapper stock to sustainable levels by 2032. This plan is currently under litigation. The plaintiffs are Coastal Conservation Association, Gulf Restoration Network, and The Ocean Conservancy.
- A recent red snapper stock assessment indicates the rate at which red snapper are being harvested and discarded as bycatch is jeopardizing the success of the rebuilding plan.
- The most recent stock assessment for red snapper can be downloaded at www.sefsc.noaa.gov/sedar/.

What are the known factors contributing to overfishing in GOM red snapper?

- There are three primary sources contributing to overfishing:
 1. shrimp trawl bycatch
 2. directed commercial and recreational harvest
 3. regulatory discards by the directed commercial and recreational fisheries
- The brown shrimp fishery, which contributes the majority of annual shrimp landings, and the directed red snapper commercial fishery are the primary sources of red snapper mortality in the western GOM. The recreational red snapper fishery is the primary source of red snapper mortality in the eastern Gulf of Mexico.
- New data and information since the 1999 stock assessment indicates discard mortality rates in the directed fishery are higher than previously thought. Most directed fishery discards are due to minimum size limits. Release mortality rates are estimated to range from 71% to 82% in the commercial red snapper fishery and 15% to 40% in the recreational red snapper fishery. While the discard mortality rate of the commercial fishery is much higher than that of the recreational fishery, the total number of red snapper annually released by the recreational fishery is substantially higher than that of the commercial fishery.

What is a rebuilding plan?

- A rebuilding plan is a strategy used to manage catches over a specified time period so that an “overfished” stock can increase in size to a legally mandated target level. A larger healthier stock will allow more catch in the future.

What is included in the current rebuilding plan?

- The current rebuilding plan, proposed in Amendment 22 to the Reef Fish Fishery Management Plan (FMP), provides for a total allowable catch (TAC) of 9.12 million pounds (MP), based on the findings of a 1999 stock assessment and assumed achievements in shrimp trawl bycatch.
- The rebuilding plan aims to phase out overfishing by 2009 and rebuild the red snapper stock by 2032.
- The rebuilding plan specifies the need for periodic reviews and adjustments as new stock assessments and assessment updates become available.

Why is it necessary to take action to end overfishing?

- The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA) requires NOAA Fisheries Service and the fishery management councils prevent overfishing, and achieve, on a continuing basis, the optimum yield (the harvest level for a species that achieves the greatest overall benefits, including economic, social, and biological) from federally managed fish stocks.
- The purpose of these mandates is to ensure fishery resources are managed for the greatest overall benefit to the nation, particularly with respect to providing food production and recreational opportunities, and protecting marine ecosystems.
- To further this goal, MSA also requires fishery managers to minimize bycatch and bycatch mortality to the extent practicable.

What are the most current regulations under the rebuilding plan?

- The recreational and commercial fisheries operate under a total allowable catch (TAC) of 9.12 million pounds (MP).
- Recreational/Charter Directed Red Snapper
 - 49% of quota
 - Minimum Size Limit: 16” Total Length
 - Closed Season: opens 12:01a.m. April 21 – closes 12:01a.m. November 1 (194-day open season)
 - Daily Bag Limit: 4 per person
- Commercial Directed Red Snapper
 - 51% of quota
 - Minimum Size Limit; 15” Total Length
 - IFQ program under Secretarial review
 - The red snapper IFQ program proposed in Reef Fish Amendment 26, and approved by the Council in March 2006, is intended to eliminate overcapitalization and derby conditions in the commercial red snapper fishery to improve fishery profitability, management, and enforcement. The results of two referendums mandated by the MSA demonstrated overwhelming support by commercial red snapper fishers for the proposed IFQ program.

- If approved, the IFQ program is scheduled for implementation January 1, 2007. The Council and NOAA Fisheries Service are holding IFQ implementation workshops throughout the Gulf region throughout the fall 2006.
- Commercial Shrimp
 - Required to use Bycatch Reduction Devices (BRDs)
 - Prohibited from fishing off Texas from May 15-July 15
 - A 10-year commercial shrimp vessel permit moratorium effective October 26, 2006 (Amendment 13 to the Gulf of Mexico Shrimp FMP).

What's the status of current action to address overfishing?

- At the August 2006 meeting, the Council decided to delay consideration of regulatory action to address overfishing until January 2007.

How did NOAA Fisheries Service respond?

- In a letter dated September 27, 2006, NOAA Fisheries Service urged the Council to implement permanent measures to address overfishing of red snapper as quickly as possible, and notified the Council of the agency's intent to:
 - Publish a draft environmental impact statement (DEIS), which evaluates alternatives to address overfishing of red snapper on an interim and permanent basis; and
 - Propose interim measures as soon as possible to address overfishing of red snapper during 2007.

Why doesn't NOAA Fisheries Service wait for the Gulf Council to resume action in January 2007?

- The Magnuson Stevens Act requires we end overfishing within the shortest possible time period, which is defined as 2009 in the red snapper rebuilding plan. The President has committed to ending overfishing as soon as possible.
- The Council's decision to postpone regulatory action effectively prevents NOAA Fisheries Service from implementing any permanent regulations proposed by the Council in time to address overfishing during 2007.
- If overfishing continues in 2007, then substantially more severe harvest reductions would be required in 2008 to end overfishing by 2009.
- Consequently, NOAA Fisheries Service has determined interim measures are needed to address overfishing of red snapper during the 2007 fishing year.

What is the status of the DEIS and is there an opportunity for public comment?

- A *Federal Register* notice published October 13, 2006, informs the public the DEIS is available for review. The document may be obtained online at: <http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/sf/RedSnapper/RedSnapperDocs.htm>
- The agency is accepting public comments on the DEIS through November 27, 2006.

What is the status of the interim measures and will there be an opportunity for public comment?

- NOAA Fisheries Service intends to publish proposed interim measures in November 2006.
- There will be a 30-day comment period on the proposed interim measures, which will begin on the date they are published in the *Federal Register*.

Will the proposed interim measures be the same as the preferred alternatives in the DEIS?

- No. The proposed interim measures will be less restrictive than the preferred alternatives in the DEIS.

What are the major differences between the proposed interim measures and the preferred alternatives in the DEIS?

• DEIS	• Proposed interim measures
– 33% reduction in total allowable catch quota	– 29% reduction in total allowable catch quota
– Reduced recreational fishing season	– No change to recreational fishing season
– Reduced recreational minimum size limit	– No change to recreational minimum size limit
– Gear restrictions	– No gear restrictions
– Procedural mechanism (“framework”) Council can use to quickly manage shrimp effort	– No framework procedure

What interim measures will NOAA Fisheries Service propose?

- Reduce commercial and recreational total allowable catch quota to 6.5 million pounds;
- Reduce recreational bag limit from 4 fish/person/day to 2 fish/person/day;
- Prohibit for-hire captain and crew from retaining recreational bag limit;
- Reduce commercial minimum size limit from 15” to 13” total length; and
- Establish a target bycatch reduction goal for the shrimp fishery, which would effectively cap effort at the 2005 level.

Why do the proposed interim measures differ from the preferred alternatives in the DEIS?

- The Magnuson-Stevens Act limits interim measures to those that would reduce overfishing.
- NOAA Fisheries Service assumes effort in the recreational red snapper fishery will be 10% below average during 2007 as the fishery continues to recover from the 2005 hurricane season. This temporary reduction in effort is not expected to continue beyond the year 2007.
- The agency determined it is not appropriate to implement on an interim basis, measures that would require fishermen to invest in new equipment, such as circle hooks and de-hooking devices.